1 Thessalonians - Commentaries by Edward B. Dennett

Three Addresses on the Lord's Return, Lord's Return: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 5:1-11, The

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As every one here will see, we have the subject of the rapture of the saints brought before us in this scripture, and it is brought before us in relation to the appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ; but before I commence to explain the subject, I want to call attention to the mode of the presentation of the coming of Christ in the previous chapters of this epistle.

You will find in the first chapter that the characteristic of every believer is that he is waiting for God's Son from heaven. Let me just read it: "Ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:9-10). Thus the characteristic of every one of us is this, that we are waiting for God's Son from heaven, and not only is that true of the believer, but of every professor (for every professor takes the same ground as the believer), so that every believer and every professor are really on the ground of waiting for God's Son from heaven. Now, whether we accept this or not, it is true, because, as you will see, these converts were converted to this expectation; they had turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven. It is a solemn thing, for if you and I are found waiting for God's Son from heaven, it must affect us practically very much in our daily lives. As I said a fortnight ago, we so often forget the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let me put the question again to you. "In how many hearts has it been present today—the Lord may return before the evening?" And yet you will see—as it is stated in this scripture to which I have called attention—that it is the characteristic of every believer and every professor to expect Christ, whether we understand it or not. Again let me remind you it must affect us, and will affect us, if we are brought under the power of that truth. It is not a doctrine, as I have often reminded you; it is a part and parcel of Christianity, and, consequently, if I am not waiting for God's Son from heaven, I am not on Christian ground. It is therefore, beloved, of the utmost importance that we should understand the truth as stated in this first chapter.

You may say to me, perhaps, "It is all very well for mature Christians to understand it." No, beloved, these converts in this epistle were not more than six months old when the apostle wrote this letter. They were young believers, what we call babes, and it is to them the apostle writes that they were waiting for God's Son from heaven. It applies, therefore, to every believer, and we must not lose sight of it, because if we do, we lose the power of the expectation of the coming of Christ.

There are two other things in the next two chapters. The first is the bearing of this teaching upon service. Let me read two verses at the end of the second chapter. "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For ye are our glory and joy" (1 Thess. 2:19-20). You will thus see in the apostle's activity that he always had the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ before him; and may I not say, therefore, that we never labor in the Lord's service, as He would have us to labor, without this motive power, if I may so describe it? I remember reading some time ago a statement in a periodical that if you hold the doctrine of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ it enervates you, and that nobody would be anxious about service, missions, and things of that kind. What could be more untrue? Here I find the apostle full of energy, and he desires the conversion of those to whom he was sent, and he labors indefatigably in the prospect of the coming of Christ. This was his one desire, that he might present his converts before the Lord, and he says, "Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?" Then he adds, "Ye are our glory and joy." You will see, therefore, the effect on service. How wonderful it is! And I may say again, I don't think I can undertake any activity properly unless this blessed truth is dominating my soul, and then in the prospect of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ I labor devotedly; and why do I thus labor? Because I want His approval, beloved. Because it is at the appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ the responsibility of the saints will be dealt with. Earth is the scene of our responsibility, and the coming of Christ is the goal to which we look, as we read in the First Epistle of Timothy, "That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Tim. 6:14). Earth is the scene of the responsibility, and when the Lord appears in glory He will display the recompense. That is what I understand by the apostle's statement—"Ye are our glory and joy."

Not to enlarge upon that, I want to call attention to two verses in the third chapter. There we see the bearing of the coming of Christ upon the spiritual life. "The Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you: to the end He may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints" (vss. 12-13). There are two things here. There is holiness at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints before God and our Father, and there is love one toward another. That is the wonderful secret! Loving one another is the way of holiness. You may talk to me about holiness from morning to night, but you will never grow in it if there is a lack of love, because love is the nature of God, and God's love is a holy love; so it comes to pass, as the apostle teaches us here, that if we love one another, and the more we love one another, the more we shall grow in conformity to the, image of Christ, the more holy we shall become, I use those last two terms interchangeably for this reason—because the idea of holiness is conformity to the image of Christ, nothing short of that, and hence if any one tells you they are holy, you have to say, "As holy as Christ is?" because nothing short of that is accepted by God. Well then, if that be so, you will see from this scripture that the more we love one another (because that is the expression of the nature of God) the more we shall grow in holiness, and that will be brought out into display at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.

Now I dare say there are some here who have sometimes said, "We have not so much energy in the Spirit as we would like to have," and others will say, "We are really doing nothing for the Lord." Ah! beloved, the reason of that is you haven't the coming of Christ before your souls; if you are living in the prospect of the appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ you will be devoted. As the apostle puts it in another place, "The love of Christ constraineth us, because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead; and that He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again" (2 Cor. 5:14-15). All that we are as children of Adam has gone in the death of Christ, and now Christ only fills the eye of God, and Christ only can fill the affections of the souls of

God's people; and then when the divine nature is in activity in the power of the Spirit, there is an immense growth in holiness, and the prospect of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ is a great incentive to it. It has an immense bearing upon the spiritual life; indeed, I may say what I said about service, no one is living properly as a Christian, no one can do so, unless he has the prospect of seeing the Lord face to face. But you will say to me, "That is a very strong statement." Well, let me give a scripture to sustain it. The Apostle John says, "It is not yet manifested what we shall be" (there is now no outward display of what we are as the children of God), "but we know that when He is manifested we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is"; and then he adds, "Every one that hath this hope in Him" (that is, Christ) "purifies himself, even as He is pure." Yes, the prospect of seeing Him and of being like Him will be a constant power acting upon the soul, so that you will get rid of everything that is unsuited to Him, and you will also desire to acquire everything that is suited to Him, that you may rejoice in the day of His appearing. Well, you see the immense bearing of this truth upon the spiritual life.

Now I come to our chapter. It bears upon bereavement, for that leads to what we get in this chapter. I will tell you how it works out. Some of these saints had died, and these believers had not the truth of the rapture, that is, the saints being caught up in the cloud to meet the Lord in the air; and they thought the saints who had died had lost something because they had died. They began to mourn; they thought that those who had died would not be here for the glory of the kingdom when the Lord Jesus Christ returns, and in order to meet that difficulty the Lord Jesus makes a special revelation to the heart of the apostle.

Let me read verses 13 and 14 again. Now I want you to attend to these two verses. Where the apostle says, "Them also which sleep in Jesus shall God bring with Him," it means at the appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ. How can that come about if they had died and departed to be with Christ? How is it possible that they will be brought back with the Lord Jesus when He returns? Now it is we get the special revelation in order to make that plain, and so the apostle proceeds, "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord" (that is, a special revelation from the Lord had been made to him), "that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep" ("prevent" is an obsolete word now, it means "shall not go before" or "get any advantage over" those asleep.) "For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:15-17).

Now before I speak of the manner of the coming, I want to call attention to the two classes which the apostle indicates. There are many saints who may die before the coming of the Lord; many have died, they have departed to be with Christ, and it is one of the most remarkable things in Scripture that we have no unfolding of the state of those who have departed to be with Christ. We only know that they are with Him. Blessedness enough, surely! We have no description, and no details given about their condition. We are told "Absent from the body, present with the Lord": "To depart and be with Christ, which is very much better." The only thing we know, therefore, about the millions of saints who have passed away is that they are with Christ, which is very much better. Ah, it is very much better! We have no description of their state of blessedness, and the only thing, I repeat, we know is that they are now with the Lord. Now, beloved, many of us may die, we don't know. Before another week it may be that some of us may pass away to be with the Lord, but if we die we pass away to be with Him. It is not death at all, death is ours. I suppose some of you have watched a dying saint. I have often done so, and the most wonderful thing that has presented itself to me as I have so watched is that when the last pulse beats that soul is with the Lord. It shows not only the Lord's triumph over death, but His triumph over death in the saints, so that you stand by the bedsides and say, "They are gone." Ah! it is better to say, "They are with the Lord." There is no possible interval, for, I repeat, death is gone for the believer. "He died," we may say; no, he sleeps. Someone once wrote to Mr. Wigram when he lived in London, "You will be grieved to hear that our dear sister So-and-so has died." He wrote back, "Died! No, she has gone to a fuller life. I can't conceive of our sister having died, she is living as she has never lived before." So, beloved, if we are called upon to die, it is only closing our eyes upon this scene and opening them, I was about to say, in the presence of the Lord.

Well, there is another class—those who will not die. The apostle speaks of those who are alive and remain at the coming of the Lord. Now if the Lord were to put it to you as to which you would choose, I wonder what you would say. Of course, the right thing to say would be, "Lord, as Thou wilt." Having had to do with the papers of dear Mr. Wigram, I came across one in which he says, "If I knew the Lord were coming today at 3:30 I would like to die at 2:30," for, "he goes on to explain, "I would like to pass through death because the Lord Himself passed through it. I would like to have every experience which the Lord had, although, of course, no one can taste death as the Lord Jesus did." Be that as it may, there are some of us who will remain unto the coming of the Lord, and you and I may. We don't know, and blessed it is for us that it is so. Still, there are some of us who may remain until the coming of the Lord, because, as far as Scripture teaches, there is nothing between the present moment and the return of the Lord Jesus. There is thus a possibility of His coming at any moment, and we should never forget the imminency of the Lord's return, so that we might be living daily in the expectation of it.

Now I will say a word about the manner of the Lord's coming. "The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout." That is, an assembling shout; you get the same word in the classics, "to assemble soldiers "; it is a shout to assemble those whom He is coming to fetch. Then we have the voice of the archangel; that is, the expression of His power; and, thirdly, the trump of God. In 1 Corinthians 15 we get the last trump, but here it simply says "the trump of God." It is the signal to march—to be caught up by divine power to meet the Lord in the air. That is how the Lord may come at any moment; but remember this, that when we speak of this coming here it is not Christ's public coming the world will know nothing about it, they will not hear the shout of Christ, neither will the saints who are alive hear it. The shout is for those who are dead, to assemble them prior to their being caught up with the living saints. That is the first thing when the Lord returns, all the saints who have died are brought out of their graves. Now mark what follows. "Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17).

Now there is another thing not given in this scripture. In 1 Corinthians 15, we read (I refer to it that you may have the whole truth), "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, for this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory." What a moment that will be! We which are alive and remain shall be changed, a wave of resurrection life and power will pass over us, all that is mortal will pass out of us, with all the corruption, and every one of us will be like the Lord. That may take place at any moment. If the Lord were to return while I am speaking of Him here tonight, that wave of resurrection life would pass over every saint, and leave us with bodies like the Lord. It is thus a wonderful statement we get here. Then mark one word, it shows the force of the passage, "shall be caught up together with them" (1 Thess. 4:16). The dead are raised and the living changed, and they are caught up together in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. What a marvelous thing it is! But here it is as plainly as possible, and

then will take place what we spoke of at the commencement. The apostle says, “If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him.” The saints have been caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; they—are with Him, and at the due time He will return with all who have been caught up to be with Him.

I have one word to say regarding the foundation on which this all rests. It rests on the simple statement in verse 14, “If we believe that Jesus died and rose again.” It was through death He destroyed him that had the power of death, “and delivered them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.” Christ has gained a complete victory over all the power of the enemy in His death; He is the triumphant One as risen out of death, and not for Himself only, because He died for His people, and so He is the Victor over death and the grave for you and for me. So everything is based upon the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that is the great foundation on which our souls rest. We know, therefore, that if Christ has died and has risen again, we, if we die, shall be raised out of our graves. The resurrection of the saints follows upon the resurrection of Christ, as the apostle says, “Christ the firstfruits, afterward they that are Christ’s at His coming.” He has rescued us from the power of the enemy, and He holds us in His hands, so that if we die His hand will reach us in the grave, we shall be raised out of it, our bodies will be changed, and we shall be like Him.

Now I cannot conceive a more wonderful thing to influence us than this. We need some such influence. We go about, and work, and get under the power of the cares of this scene, and forget the wonderful prospect we have before us; we become worldly. How can we if we are expecting the coming of Christ? We go in for worldly amusements. How can we if we are waiting for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ? No! we should say, the Lord might come in the midst of it. And what then? As Peter says, “Be diligent, that ye may be found of Him in peace, without spot and blameless.”

Now I want to say a word in regard to the relation of this to the appearing. We are caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and we go in with Him. The first act of Christ when we are caught up is to introduce us into the Father’s house, and then if we go in with Him it is in order to come out with Him, and, beloved, if I love the appearing of Christ, I shall rejoice at this prospect of His coming out, and I will tell you why. If I think of the rapture of the saints, of necessity, I begin to think of what I get, but when I think of the appearing, I begin to think of what He will get. Is it no joy for us to remember that in this very scene where He was crucified, rejected, and cast out, He will triumph, that He will have His rights in the very scene where he was rejected? He said, “I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me,” and that will never be fulfilled until He has come back; every one then will bow to Him, and every tongue confess that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Further, if I confine my thoughts to the rapture, I don’t get the scope of Scripture, and I don’t enter into communion with the heart of God. Remember this, the whole universe is to be flooded with the glory of God, it is to be a universe of bliss. How is that to be brought about? Only by Christ coming out with His saints, and then the whole universe will be in accord with the mind of God. It is then everything will resound to the praise of Him whose counsel it was that everything in heaven and in earth should be headed up under Christ. This wonderful prospect of everything in heaven and in earth being headed up under Christ should rejoice our hearts; He, the Supreme One; and He will retain that supremacy until the end of the kingdom, and then, as we get in 1 Corinthians 15, He will deliver up the kingdom. He will have reduced everything to submission to Himself, everything will have been put under His feet, and when that consummation is reached, then it is He will deliver up the kingdom He has won, and over which He has reigned, and the object will be that God may be all in all.

Another remarkable thing I will say before I conclude is that you have no account in Scripture of Christ in eternity. No; we know He is in eternity, but this is the last act of His that we get in the Scriptures, He hands up the kingdom to God and the Father, that God may be all in all; only remember when I say this, that when we get the term “God” absolutely in Scripture it includes Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And why is Christ not mentioned? Why have we no description of Him in eternity? The only detailed account we have of eternity is in Revelation 21:1-8. There it is God, there is no mention of the Lord Jesus Christ. I will tell you why it is. He is the firstborn among many brethren. When He came into this scene He became a man, and He remains a man forever; and thus He will move amongst His redeemed as the firstborn of all who are conformed to His image, so that in eternity He will always be with us and we shall always delight in His presence. God will be the joy of His heart, as of our hearts; and then, as He surveys the multitudes of the redeemed of all ages, He will see of the travail of His soul, and be satisfied.

I cannot go into the next chapter, but I will point out the connection of it that you may understand it. The first five verses refer to the appearing of Christ—the day of the Lord. The day of the Lord is this, it introduces the reign of Christ. It always has the aspect of judgment, because when it is introduced Christ will put down all things that are opposed to God. That is the first part of the reign of Christ, He comes in judgment. If you read Isaiah 2 you will see that the day of the Lord is against everything that lifts itself up against the supremacy of God. Everything opposed to God will be dealt with in judgment, and then it is we get the day of Christ, when everything will be in subjection to Him; and so the apostle reminds us here that while the day of the Lord will come as a thief upon those who are not watching, that is, upon the unconverted here, still, as he goes on to say, “But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness” (1 Thess. 5:4-5). Since we are the children of the day now, we are to live according to the day to which we belong, for the moral characteristics of that day have to be displayed in and through the saints of God, and you get exhortations consequent upon that. You see it in verse 6: “Therefore, let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep, sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation. For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ” (that is, at His coming, a complete and final salvation), “who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him” (1 Thess. 5:6-10).

Now one word upon the double exhortation that we get in verse 11: “Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another.” Well, beloved, as I said to you, many of the saints have passed away, and if we are tempted to mourn over them, the apostle gives us these words at the direction of the Lord for our comfort, as he says in the last verse of the fourth chapter, “Wherefore comfort one another with these words.” Are they lost because they have died? God forbid. No; as I have explained to you, their spirits are with Christ, their bodies are crumbling in the grave, but we know that when the Lord comes He will call them out of their graves, and will give them bodies like His own; and that will be the complete and final triumph of Christ in redemption. In the meantime it is “comfort one another”; and we are to edify one another, that is, I apprehend, build up one another in the truth the apostle has brought before us. What a hope it is to have this wonderful prospect, and yet I am afraid that it has faded away somewhat from our hearts and minds. I know, alas! in my own heart how easy it is to lose it, to be satisfied with things here; but God has some better thing in store for us—we must not forget it—and we shall be introduced into it when the moment comes.

Oh, that God would so work as to revive in all our hearts the expectation of the coming of Christ! I believe it would revive us in a wonderful way if you and I and all the saints of God were in the power of it. It would deliver us from the tyranny of present things, and our hearts would be drawn up to the place where Christ is, and we should find that to be our true circle—where He is—and then we should realize the truth of that passage we had last week, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

May God speak to us, beloved, and awaken us for His Name’s sake.

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